



The Mentor: the all Important Application Letter

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Editor's note: The Mentor column is a place for advice, storytelling, introspection and professional growth.

So, there it is. Your dream job. It's the right job in the right place and at the perfect time. As you read the advertisement and look into it, your interest rises. This is it. This is the one. Other than a well-crafted resume/vitae, how do you make yourself stand out from the crowd? How do you ensure that you've done your best to pass the first review and land a spot in the top of the candidate pool?

If this is the type of job that allows you to submit a cover letter with your application, this is your chance to shine. A cover letter (sometimes called a letter of application) is your chance to make your case. If the job is popular, and the search committee receives a lot of applications, your cover letter is the key to making yourself stand out. You'll need a campaign strategy to help you craft your message. Simply taking an old cover letter and changing the position title or institutional address will not be enough.

Before you even sit down to write, analyze the position advertisement itself. *Every word* in an announcement has been carefully drafted with intent by those looking to hire. Use it like a street map with directions to the job itself. Start by closely reviewing the requirements or qualifications sections. Many position announcements will have a section that is labeled "required" or "minimum" and one that is "preferred." You must have the minimums to get past the first stage review. Preferred qualities are like bonus points. The more you rack up, the higher you rise in the pool.

As you read through these areas, highlight key words and jot down notes in the margins (or add comments electronically) about how your background fits each one. If spreadsheets are a useful way to organize your thoughts, set one up with the advertisement requirements in one column and your skills in the next. Try to note something in your background that fits each one or that explains how you might go about learning this new area. Often these sections are listed as bullet points, so consider using them as a checklist when you write your letter.

Next, if there is a section on knowledge, skills and abilities, do the same with that section. Then go on to the sections on job duties and the opening description of the advertisement and record your notes. Pay attention to overlap or areas that seem to be mentioned more than once. You may want to count instances of critical words. Overlap is particularly noteworthy as these areas offer clues to the important aspects of the candidate that may go beyond the job duties themselves. Make note of descriptive words.

Finally, are there requirements in the "to apply" section? What documents do you need to include when you submit your application? Do you need to answer specific questions as part of the application letter? Responding to specific application questions is often an excellent place to weave in references to the minimum and preferred requirements too.

For example, a paragraph from a recent job ad reads:

"The ideal candidate is passionate about providing excellent library service to tweens and teens (11-17), with an emphasis on outcomes driven, project-based program planning, outreach, STEM, reader's advisory, teen volunteer supervision and relationship building with families and community stakeholders. This position works in collaboration with our [named location team] as well as the library system's Youth Services Team. Knowledge of emerging technologies, education, and trends in youth development and/or libraries are strongly recommended. Being "fresh, fun and fearless" and "relentlessly resourceful" are core values of [library name] and essential to this position."

From this job ad, you might list key aspects of the position as:

- passionate about excellent library service
- outcomes driven
- project-based program planning
- outreach
- STEM
- reader's advisory
- teen volunteer supervision
- relationship building with stakeholders
- knowledge of emerging technologies, education, trends in youth development/libraries (emphasized)
- essential Core Values = "fresh, fun and fearless" and "relentlessly resourceful"

As you write your application letter, refer to each one of these items. Don't be shy about using key terminology from the ad such as passionate, fearless, and resourceful to describe your own successes and experiences.

Here are some additional tips that will help you improve your chances of rising to the top:

- Spell it out explicitly. Draw a direct line from statements in the job advertisement to your qualifications. Don't assume that your qualifications will be obvious from your resume/vitae and don't make the search committee hunt for them! If you have a friend or acquaintance on the search committee, this also protects them by making your qualifications obvious to everyone.
- Double check application requirements and minimums. If a search committee is faced with a pool of 75 or more applications, the first review will be to check if you've included everything and have all the minimums – yes/no. If you missed something, your application may well be eliminated in the first pass even if you are a good candidate. Missing items are often seen as a lack of interest in the position, inability to follow instructions or a lack of attention to detail.
- Use an editor. Find a friend or colleague who will read the job ad, read your draft letter and help you craft a better message. This is particularly important if you're shy about self-promotion.
- Try to address everything in the job announcement. Is there something in your background, in your pre-library work history or personal life that might apply? If not how would you address this gap?
- Electronic application systems enhance the search process, though they are not a substitute for a good application letter. Even if the hiring institution uses an electronic system that quizzes you on the minimum and preferred items as you apply, you still should address each of these in your application

letter. In fact, the search committee will likely look for evidence that you have all the skills you claimed to have in answering the application questions.

- If the announcement requires an MLS/MLIS degree by a particular date or requires a particular number of years of post MLS/MLIS experience, make sure you note the year and month of your degree if needed.
- Be very selective about what you choose not to address directly in your cover letter (see paragraph 3). There may be items that will be answered via the process itself, such as your ability to pass a criminal background check, that may be skipped. As general rule, you should mention nearly everything in the job announcement.

If you treat the position announcement as a document to dissect and analyze and spend the time to really figure out how to fit yourself as closely as possible to the needs of the hiring institution, you will have done your best to pass the first few reviews and land a spot in the top of the candidate pool.

Good luck!

Want to share your experience finding or preparing to find your first job? Write us at pqeditors@gmail.com!

Tracy Bicknell-Holmes has more than 25 years of experience working in academic libraries in positions with progressively greater responsibility. She currently serves as Dean of Albertsons Library at Boise State University. She has been an active member of the Library Leadership Advisory Committee (LiLAC), a collaborative effort between the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Idaho Library Association that has been appointed and charged with developing a framework for leadership development for all members of the Idaho library community. Her current work in this area involves mentoring.